GANJIFA FROM BENGAL
DASAVATAR CARDS

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declaration by the student

I hereby declare that the work which is being presented in this dissertation entitled "Ganjifa From Bengal: Dasavatar Cards" in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Print making is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the period from 2023 to 2025 under the supervision of Nandini Ghosh Department of Fine Arts and Design. I acknowledge that I have read and understood the UGC regulations, 2018 (Promotion of Academic integrity and Prevention of Plagiarism in Higher Educational Institutions).

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acknowledgement

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Anwesha Ghosh

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introduction

Throughout the ages, mankind has been constantly trying to search for methods of pastime. Human beings have primarily been farmers and hunters. As civilization developed over time, slowly human beings develop a system of money earning with the help of specializing in a certain kind of work which later developed into the term profession. With profession came constraints in time. And as human beings became busier, they developed the need for more and more hobbies during there free time. Such hobbies included the very important activity of playing cards. I have developed a keen interest in in this favourite hobby of mankind since time immemorial. What has fascinated me is a simple set of playing cards clearly depicting the entire societal structure of a certain dynasty or Kingdom or time period. Being a fine arts student, it has fascinated me that such playing cards have been made totally by hand, starting from the Mughal Era till modern Times.

chapter 1: **cards around the globe**

Playing cards has been a pastime for human beings for thousands of years. Their structures and designs vary greatly depending on their geography and time period. Hence, these cards also give us an insight into the entire glove's geographical evolution, culture, clothing, societal structures, etc.

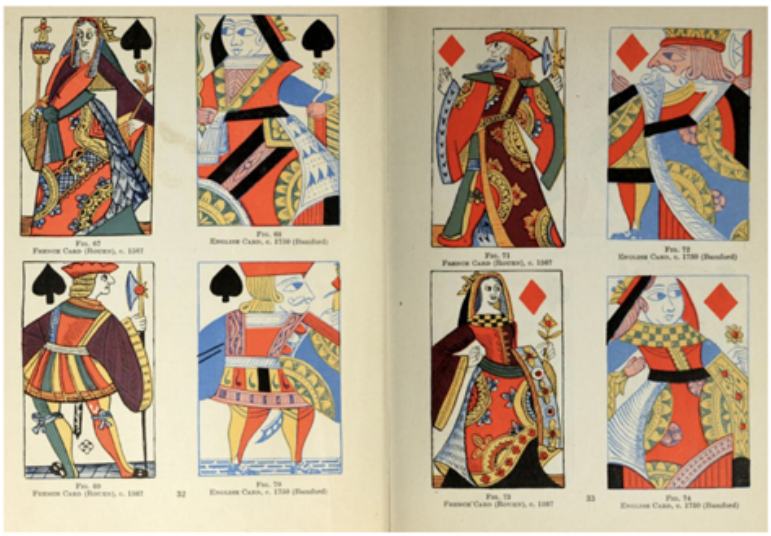
Some popular playing cards over centuries can be roughly documented and categorised as follows:

1. The wine cards from the Tong dynasty dating back to the 6th century in China.

2. The Mughal Ganjifa cards, existing in India probably from as early as the 1500's.

3. The Dasavatar cards, featuring the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, existing roughly around the late 1500's.

4. French playing cards, brought to England by the English soldiers fighting wars in Normandy, France in the early 15th century. Soon after these cards would take on the form of the usual spades-and-clubs and hearts-and-diamonds as we know in the present time.



5. Chinese Domino cards, appearing during the reign of the southern Song dynasty around 16th century.

6. The 20th century playing cards depicting Indian courts made in Paris.

7. The Raja Ravi Varma printed cards, depicting a separate historical set and a separate mythological set, all published between 1905 - 1910.

8. The Dilkhush playing cards, printed by Van Genechten, a popular Belgian cardmaker for the Calcutta based Kamala Soap factory in 1922.

9. The Alphabet cards by the Poona Chitrashala Press, printed both in Marathi and Urdu, around 1940.

10. The Air India playing cards, included as a part of their in-flight collectables, manufactured by Playwell Playing Cards Co. in 1980.

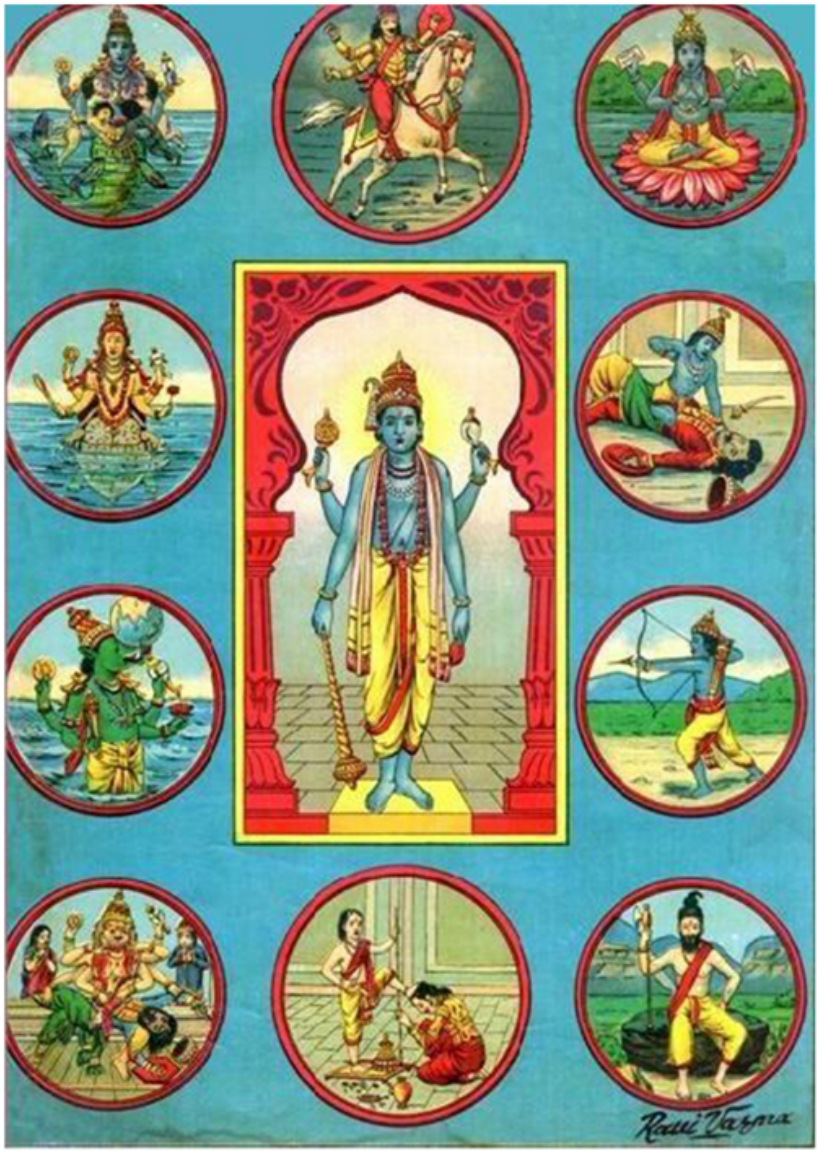
Card playing was popular throughout Mediaeval India. Visually, card playing was refer to Ganjifa, and each region of the country had its own set of cards, varying in forms, format of playing, shapes, characters and materials used.

A few popular Ganjifa cards include:

1. The Kasmir Ganjifa
2. The Nepal Ganjifa
3. The Rajasthan Ganjifa
4. The Sawantwadi Ganjifa from Maharashtra
5. The Navadurga Ganjifa from Odisha
6. The Mysooru Ganjifa

The word **"Mythology"** roughly translates to the group of myths or folklore connected to a particular civilization or religion. The Hindu mythology has its sources lying in text books like **the Puranas, the Vedas, the Mahabharata** and **the Ramayana**.

An important central character found in almost all these sacred Hindu texts is the character of lord Vishnu. Throughout Hindu mythology, we find the reference of lord Vishnu and his tension forms or as they say **"incarnations" - the Dasavatara**. Lord Vishnu is considered to be the god of balance : whose only reason for arrival was to restore the balance in a world heavily imbalanced by **war, corruption, violence** and **chaos**.



Lord Vishnu and Ten Avatars - The Dasavataras

In order to playfully educate the common masses of Bishnupur, the capital of the Mallabhum kingdom (once the most vital Hindu dynasty in Bengal), king Hambir Malladev also known as **"Bir Hambir"** introduced the concept of the Dasavatar cards.

The Dasavatar cards are a unique set of cards that tell us the stories of lord Vishnu. Unlike the typical hearts and spades, instead they showcase the ten incarnations of lord Vishnu. Though the Dasavatar cards are now only made in Bishnupur, but the earliest origin of these cards remain uncertain. The birth of these cards can be closely associated to the already existing card game of the Mughals - **"Ganjifa"** cards.

The Ganjifa cards are believed to be rooted from Persia. The first syllable of the word **"Ganjifa"** is derived from the Persian word **'Ganj'** meaning 'treasure'. Last two syllables of the word might be inspired from the Chinese word **'chi-pai'** meaning 'playing cards'. An 18th century traveller Carsten Niebuhr claimed that he had seen some Arabian merchants playing Chinese cards in Bombay. Later another traveller documented that small Chinese cards were played almost everywhere in Arab.

Mughal Ganjifa Cards

Ganjifa became popular in India under the Mughal emperors in 16th century. Now it is also played in some places of Odisha with 96 cards in 8 suits of 12 cards each.

In 1952, Bir Hambir became the king of Bishnupur. He had a great friendship with emperor Akbar. During a visit to Akbar's court, kint Hambir came across the Ganjifa cards. In the Mughal darbar, king Hambir observed that the begams and their maids used to play this card game in their free time. Even the soldiers played these Ganjifa cards when they didn't have to go to war. Bir Hambir learnt from the Mughals how to play this game. Heavily inspired from these Ganjifa cards, he decided to create a new and unique set of cards for his kingdom featuring the ten avatars of lord Vishnu.

Although Ganjifa's gameplay and card structure appeared to be the same as Dasavatar cards but the suits themselves are entirely dissimilar.

In Ganjifa, each suit has two court cards, Shah (king) and Wazir (minister) with the numerical cards one to ten. The twelve suits of Akbar's Ganjifa include Horses, Elephants, Infantry, Treasures, Warriors, Ships, Women, Gods, Demons, wild beasts and Serpants. The Ganjifa cards and their Characters bear resemblance and are based on the societal structure of the Mughals i.e the Muslim society where as the Dasavatar cards owe their existence to the Hindu societal structure.

Mughal Ganjifa Set of Cards

chapter 2: **origin & making process**

The mystical story revolving around the Dasavatar is ancient, but the idea of portraying it in the form of playing cards of varied colours, shapes and forms is probably a concept which no historian can actually date. The birth of these cards and exact time when these cards came into popular culture is unknown and filled with mystery. Card playing has been a popular game among bengalis but it has always been the usual **king-and-queen** and **spades-and-diamonds**.

Probably this format was born during British rule, due to the colonial nature of the British. It is evident that the long history of our slavery towards the British during they ruled is interrelated and subtly hints at this king and queen and slave format.

But history states that the origin of court cards dates back to much earlier times. The only thing that changed during British rule is the symbols. The **"Saheb-Bibi-Ghulam"** format during the British rule was different from the format before the pre-British era. We are not familiar with these early formats and sadly that old format has been lost in the sands of time.

The first ten cards bear the figures of the **10 avatars of Lord Vishnu**. Another ten cards bear the figures of the **Wazir (vizier)**. The cards bear resemblance to the different classes and sections of the society and that time- **Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Chhakka (Six), Panja (Five), Chouka (Four), Tiri (Three), Duri (Two) and Tekka (One)**. The entire concept vividly portrays the structure of the society during those ancient times. It is believed that the power of these 10 avatars of Lord Vishnu is endless and since their trustees are the Wazirs (viziers), therefore it can be concluded that their powers are also limitless. So we can see characters in the cards directly associated with characters in the society- from monarch and noble men to Zamindars and land lords to foot soldiers and Infantrymen. As we see in chess- a game of king and queen, rooks and bishops and knights and pawns ; these Dasavatar cards have their own set of characters from their society.

Since the entire concept of the Dasavatar Cards is pretty tough and classified, only people adept at the working theory of the game could play it. The game had been passed on from King Bir Hambir to his closest associates, members of his court, who then passed it on further to their acquaintances, and this loop continued till the game reached on and became popular among general masses.

Since the game involved projections of the Ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu, a very sacred deity to Hindus, a few customary traditions had to be followed. The players had to wash their hands, then spread a fresh washed length of cloth, following which they had to sit around the cloth on small stools. If by chance any of the players had to go to relieve themselves, everyone would have to pause the game and wait for that player to have a fresh bath and then resume the game.

Dasavatar cards are played by five people with 120 cards. It is the most popular set played throughout India.

At the begining of the game, a customary request is made by all the players to Lord Vishnu. This request is known as “Aarji” in the local language. This “Aarji” has been passed on in the format of a rhyming riddle. The “Aarji” goes as follows:

Chobigulo chine niye, bhalo kore mishaye;
Gonda gonda kore dao bilaye.
Sath Vrigu, Aat Koli, Noy Dash Padma pheli
Prabhur ashon khani dao sajaye.

Pratham avatar jaar du dastur hobe taar
Aaro hobe jor bhenge, thek kheye saroa.
Jor tip, tip soi, kimba sotip hole
Du dastur hoye onner pawa.

Taaro hobe jor bhenge thek kheye saroa
Na thakile bojh hoye jay pawa
Haath soi kore keu kichu pawar ashay
Thik thik rekhe baki phele diye jay.

Ponero dostu hole saroa aat nahi chole
Paona dostu niye bojh hoye jay,
Haath soi korate bhul hoye jay.
Sesh Panch dostu nahi taar odhikar.

Thik thik hath soi jodi khelo, khelo pore
Onner sob kheloar poribe phapore
Ek point jeet hoy Panch dostu hole
Ei bhabe khela chole Prabhur pad-pronam janiye.

After the “Aarji”, all the 120 cards are shuffled. Then they are distributed from both the sides. Every player shall get 24 cards each, in sets of 4.

In the first 5 suits, 1 is the highest number and 10 is the lowest number after the King and Wazir Cards. Whereas in the last 5 suits, 10 is the hightest and 1 the lowest numerical.

All cards in the suit have the oppurtunity of becoming the trump card, depending on the time of the day when they are being played.

In the dawn, the Jagannath/Padma Avatar card is played because the "Padma" or the lotus blooms in dawn.

When there is heavy thunder and rainfall, the fish comes up on land from the water, hence the "Kurma" or the fish avatar card is being played.

The "Ram" Avatar card is played from 9 a.m. in the morning throughout the day.

The "Krishna" suit of cards becomes the trump card at night, signifiying the connection of Lord Krishna with the night.

There is also a rule of Dukkal Playing, which means players can play a King Card along with a Wazir and more cards in any random sequence.

THE TEN INCARNATIONS: **THE DASAVATARA**

The Ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu are ten of the most principal deities in Hinduism. Each of these incarnations has a particular mythological story revolving around them and to Hindus, each incarnation is a separate deity of devotion. The three principal deities of Hinduism are:

1. **Brahma** - The Creator
2. **Shiva** - The Destroyer
3. **Vishnu** - The Preserver

The Ten Avatars or the **Dasavatar** as portrayed in the cards are as follows:

MATSYA

KURMA

VARAHA

NARASIMHA

VAMANA

PARASHURAMA

RAMA

KRISHNA

BUDDHA

KALKI

MATSYA (The Fish)

In the Satya Yuga (the Age of Truth), a great flood threatened to engulf all of creation. Lord Vishnu incarnated as a giant fish to save Manu, the creator of humanity, along with the sacred Vedas and all living beings. Guiding Manu's ark through the turbulent waters, Matsya ensured the continuity of life and knowledge for the next cycle.

KURMA (The Tortoise)

During the churning of the cosmic ocean (Samudra Manthan) by the gods and demons to obtain the nectar of immortality (Amrita), Mount Mandara, used as a churning rod, began to sink. Lord Vishnu manifested himself as a colossal tortoise, Kurma, and supported the massive mountain on his back, providing the stable base needed for this pivotal event.

VARAHA (The Boar)

The demon Hiranyaksha plunged the Earth (Bhudevi) into the cosmic ocean. To rescue her, Lord Vishnu assumed the powerful form of a boar, Varaha. After a fierce battle lasting a thousand years, Varaha banished the demon and lifted the Earth out of the waters with his tusks, restoring it to its rightful place.

NARASIMHA (The Man-Lion)

The demon king Hiranyakashipu, the brother of Hiranyaksha, seeks to avenge his brother's death. After hard penance, he had gained a boon from Lord Brahma, which ensured that he can be killed by neither man nor animal, neither indoor nor outdoor, neither in the day nor at night, neither in the ground nor in the sky. He used this power to subjugate the Gods. Then Lord Vishnu descended as Narasimha: Half-Man, Half-Lion and killed him in twilight on the threshold of his house by laying him across his lap and using his claws to disembowel him.

VAMANA (The Dwarf)

The demon king Bali, grandson of the devout Prahlad, had through his austerities and strength conquered the three worlds. The gods, dispossessed of their realms, sought Lord Vishnu's help. Vishnu manifested as Vamana, a dwarf Brahmin, and approached Bali during an Ashwamedha Yajna (horse sacrifice).

Bali, known for his generosity, asked Vamana what he desired. Vamana, with deceptive simplicity, requested only three paces of land measured by his own feet. Despite warnings from his advisor Shukracharya about Vamana's true identity, Bali, bound by his word, agreed.

Suddenly, Vamana grew to an enormous size, his first step covering the entire Earth, and his second encompassing the heavens. With nowhere left to place his third step, Vamana asked Bali where to put it. Recognizing Vishnu, and honoring his promise, Bali humbly offered his own head.

Pleased with Bali's devotion and integrity, Vishnu pushed him down to Patal (the netherworld) but granted him sovereignty there. As a reward for his unwavering righteousness, Vishnu also promised Bali that he would become Indra in a future epoch. This avatar highlights the victory of humility and dharma over pride and ambition.

PARASHURAMA (The Warrior with the Axe)

In the Treta Yuga, the Kshatriya (warrior) class had become arrogant and tyrannical, abusing their power and oppressing the Brahmins and other beings. To restore balance, Vishnu incarnated as Parashurama, the son of the sage Jamadagni and Renuka. He was born with innate Brahminical wisdom and Kshatriya-like valor.

Parashurama received a divine axe (Parashu) from Lord Shiva after rigorous penance, hence his name. When the powerful king Kartavirya Arjuna stole Jamadagni's sacred cow Kamadhenu and killed the sage, Parashurama was enraged. He vowed to rid the Earth of the corrupt Kshatriyas.

Legend says Parashurama single-handedly waged war against the Kshatriya rulers, annihilating them twenty-one times. He filled five lakes with their blood. While this account is considered symbolic hyperbole, it emphasizes his fierce determination to restore dharma.

Later in his life, Parashurama humbled his own pride when he encountered Lord Rama, recognizing him as a greater avatar of Vishnu. He also became a renowned teacher of martial arts, with disciples like Bhishma, Drona, and Karna in the Mahabharata era. Parashurama represents righteous anger against injustice and the power of penance and valor combined.

RAMA (The Righteous Prince)

Born in Ayodhya as the eldest son of King Dasharatha and Queen Kaushalya, Rama is the epitome of dharma, righteousness, and ideal manhood. His life, chronicled in the epic Ramayana, is a tale of upholding moral values under the most challenging circumstances.

Due to a promise Dasharatha made to his stepmother Kaikeyi, Rama was exiled to the forest for fourteen years. He willingly accepted this fate to honor his father's word. His devoted wife Sita and loyal brother Lakshmana accompanied him.

During their exile, Sita was abducted by the demon king Ravana of Lanka. Rama, with unwavering determination and the help of an army of monkeys led by Hanuman, waged a fierce war against Ravana. He ultimately vanquished the demon king, rescued Sita, and returned to Ayodhya, where he was crowned king.

Rama's reign was characterized by justice, peace, and prosperity, establishing the ideal of "Rama Rajya" (the rule of Rama), which signifies a golden age of righteous governance. His life exemplifies the importance of duty, integrity, compassion, and the triumph of good over evil.

KRISHNA (The Divine Cowherd)

Born in Mathura to Devaki and Vasudeva, Krishna is perhaps the most beloved and multifaceted avatar of Lord Vishnu. His life is filled with divine playfulness (Leela), profound wisdom, and heroic deeds. To escape the wrath of his wicked uncle Kamsa, who sought to kill him due to a prophecy, Krishna was raised in Gokul by his foster parents Nanda and Yashoda among the cowherds.

His childhood in Vrindavan is filled with enchanting stories of his mischievous pranks, his flute playing that captivated all hearts, and his divine love for Radha and the Gopis. These stories symbolize the soul's yearning for the divine.

Later, Krishna returned to Mathura, overthrew Kamsa, and established peace. He played a crucial role in the epic Mahabharata, acting as the charioteer and guide to the Pandava prince Arjuna. On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, he delivered the profound spiritual teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which explores the nature of reality, duty, devotion, and liberation.

Krishna's life encompasses various roles: the playful child, the enchanting lover, the wise counselor, the strategic warrior, and the supreme spiritual teacher. He represents the fullness of divine manifestation, encompassing both human and transcendent qualities.

BUDDHA/JAGANNATHA (The Enlightened One/Lord of the Universe)

The ninth avatar is often identified as Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, who founded Buddhism. Born a prince, he renounced worldly life to seek enlightenment and alleviate suffering. His teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path offer a way to end the cycle of rebirth and attain Nirvana.

However, in some regional traditions, particularly in Odisha, Lord Jagannath is considered the ninth avatar. Jagannath, meaning "Lord of the Universe," is worshipped in the famous Puri temple along with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. The origins and identity of Jagannath are complex and debated, with connections to tribal deities, syncretic traditions, and Vaishnavism.

While seemingly distinct, both Buddha and Jagannath represent a divergence from traditional Vedic practices and an emphasis on compassion, wisdom, and a path to liberation or spiritual understanding. The inclusion of Buddha as an avatar can be seen as the assimilation of a major religious tradition into the Hindu pantheon, while Jagannath embodies a unique regional manifestation of the divine.

Since Bir Hambir had designed the cards based on the Ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu, his set of cards did not include Lord Buddha's figures. He rather stuck to using images of Lord Jagannath instead.

KALKI (The Future Warrior)

Kalki is the tenth and final avatar of Vishnu, who is yet to appear at the end of the current Kali Yuga (the age of darkness and degradation). According to prophecies, when dharma has completely declined, and evil reigns supreme, Kalki will descend on a white horse named Devadatta, wielding a blazing sword.

He will vanquish the wicked, destroy the अधर्म (adharma - unrighteousness), and usher in a new Satya Yuga (the age of truth and purity), restoring cosmic balance and righteousness.

Kalki's appearance signifies the cyclical nature of time and the ultimate triumph of good over evil in the grand cosmic drama.

These ten avatars of Lord Vishnu illustrate the divine principle of intervention in the world to uphold dharma and guide humanity through different epochs. Each avatar embodies specific qualities and addresses unique challenges, showcasing the boundless compassion and power of the Supreme Being.

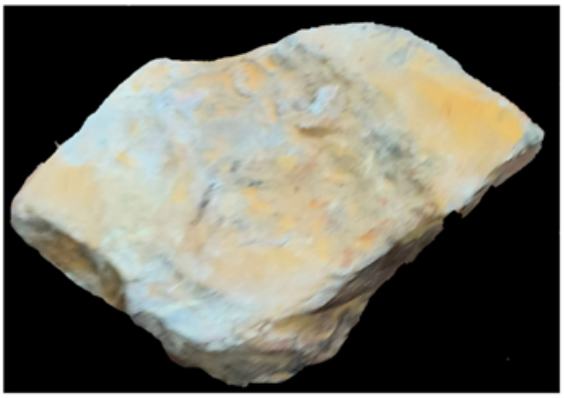
MAKING OF THE CARDS

When Bir Hambir first saw the Ganjifa Cards, he decided to create his own set of Dasavatar Cards for his Kingdom. He also learnt how to play the cards. He had got some people from Rajasthan as soldiers to Bishnupur for war. When he showed the cards to them, one of the soldiers from the Fouzdar family claimed that he could make these cards. From them till date, only the Fouzdars have been making these cards for generations. Shital Fouzdar, who is the present and the only maker of the Dashavatar Cards states that he is the 87th generation of Fouzdars, who is still involved in the making of these cards.

The Dasavatara Cards are not made with paper or cardboard, but only with clothes, tamarind, starch and lacquer.

"First, a piece of cloth is folded over and pasted using glue made from tamarind seeds. After it dries, a layer of chalk dust is applied,"explains Sikha Fouzdar, member of a popular card making family from Bishnupur. "Both sides are evened out with a smooth stone. The cards are then cut into round shapes of two-and-a-half-inch radius," she adds. "Then the ten incarnations are painted on the cards with earth colours. "

The Yellow colour is made with raw turmeric.
The Blue colour is made with Aparajita (Blue Pea) flower.
The Red colour is made with a special type of red sandstone.
The Black colour is made with Soot, collected from the smoke.
The White colour is used from white clay (Khori maati).



The brush that is used to paint the cards are hand made by the artists themselves. The brush fur is made with goat-hair collected from its tail.

chapter 3: **evolution of the cards**

During the times of Bir Hambir, when the Dasavatar Cards had been inspired from the Ganjifa cards, artists from his kingdom had created the Dasavatar cards with extreme detailing and skills par excellence.

As time passed by, in the later years gradually the artists lost their touch, and the Dasavatara Cards gradually declined in quality.

With time, the ornamentation and fine detailing of these avatars has dropped considerably. The extreme figurative details and the curves also have flattened out gradually with time. Also the colours used in borders of these cards have faded due to the drop in quality of the raw materials used for creating these cards.

For quite a few years now, to attract tourists and buyers, these avatars are being used not just in cards but also in different other products like souvenirs such as lamps, calendars, utensils made out of clay etc. Nowadays, Bishnupur artisans are also constantly creating paintings of these Dasavatars to create newer ideas and fresher concepts in the watercolour on canvas medium.

Lamps with the Avatar Motifs

Painting Inspired from Dasavatar

With time, these cards are slowly and gradually getting lost in the sands of time. Only a few artisans from the entire country are dedicatedly still creating these Ganjifa Cards and Dasavatar Cards. Even though there is still a niche demand for these cards outside India as a rare collectors memorabilia, very few people in the world can actually still play this game, or are even interested to learn how to play it in this AI-Driven Digital Age.

Being associated with the making, creation and passing on the tradition of the Dasavatar Cards, the Fouzdar family is one of those rare families in the entire country who are still relentlessly and tirelessly creating these cards.

Shital Fouzdar, Present Day Dasavatar Card Artisan

It is the immediate need of the hour, not just for artists, but for all sensible connoisseurs of the country to collect these rare cards and to document their presence and evolution with time.

Otherwise centuries of physical and mental involvement with the Dasavatar Cards shall soon be wiped off from the face of the earth.

conclusion

The concept of Dasavatar is entirely a mythological concept. This concept was then transferred to playing cards, to imbibe the spirit of the Dasavatar into the common masses. This is a perfect example of a cultural concept becoming the basis for a wide and enriched resource base. Within the state of West Bengal, the Dasavatar Cards are extremely place specific, namely only being manufactured in Bishnupur. Bir Hambir was the pioneer of these cards after getting heavily inspired from the Ganjifa Cards from the Mughal era. So the Malla Dynasty, even though being a Hindu Dynasty, shares a Muslim Dynasty's cultures and morphs it into its own socio-cultural setting. What can be a better example of diversity than this?

The current scenario of the Dasavatar cards require immediate attention, in order to restore and save the entire culture of Bishnupur, otherwise these cards and the entire folklore surrounding these cards will soon be lost in oblivion.

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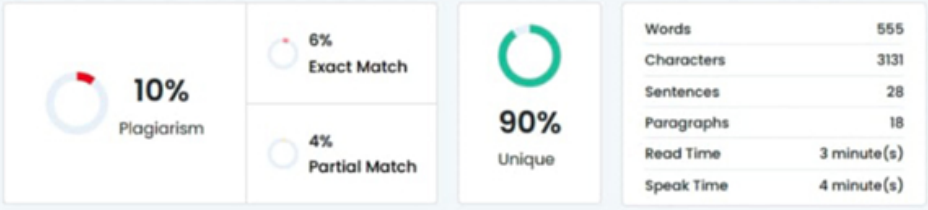

Words	555
Characters	3131
Sentences	28
Paragraphs	18
Read Time	3 minute(s)
Speak Time	4 minute(s)

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The Dasavatara Cards are not made with paper or cardboard, but only with clothes, tamarind, starch and lacquer.

"First, a piece of cloth is folded over and pasted using glue made from tamarind seeds. After it dries, a layer of chalk dust is applied, "explains Sikha Fouzdar, member of a popular card making family from Bishnupur. "Both sides are evened out with a smooth stone. The cards are then cut into round shapes of two-and-a-half-inch radius," she adds. "Then the ten incarnations are painted on the cards with earth colours.

The Yellow colour is made with raw turmeric.

The Blue colour is made with Aparajita (Blue Pea) flower. The Red colour is made with a special type of red sandstone.

The Black colour is made with Soot, collected from the smoke. The White colour is used from white clay (Khori maati).

The first ten cards bear the figures of the 10 avatars of Lord Vishnu. Another

ten cards bear the figures of the Wazir (vizier). The cards bear resemblance

to the different classes and sections of the society and that time- Ten, Nine,

Eight, Seven, Chhakka (Six), Panja (Five), Chouka (Four), Tiri (Three), Duri (Two) and Tekka (One). The entire concept vividly portrays the structure of the society during those ancient times. It is believed that the power of these 10 avatars of Lord Vishnu is endless and since their trustees are the Wazirs (viziers), therefore it can be concluded that their powers are also limitless. So we can see characters in the cards directly associated with characters in the society- from monarch and noble men to Zamindars and land lords to foot soldiers and infantrymen. As we see in chess- a game of king and queen, rooks and bishops and knights and pawns; these Dasavatar cards have their own set of characters from their society.
Since the entire concept of the Dasavatar Cards is pretty tough and classified, only people adept at the working theory of the game could play it. The game had been passed on from King Bir Hambir to his closest associates, members of his court, who then passed it on further to their acquaintances, and this loop continued till the game reached on and became popular among general masses.

Since the game involved projections of the Ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu, a very

sacred deity to Hindus, a few customary traditions had to be followed. The players had to wash their hands,

then spread a fresh washed length of cloth, following which they had to sit around the cloth on small stools. If by chance any of the players had to go to relieve themselves, everyone would have to pause the game and wait for that player to have a fresh bath and then

resume the game.

Dasavatar cards are played by five people with 120 cards. It is the most popular set played throughout India.

In the first 5 suits, 1 is the highest number and 10 is the lowest number after the King and Wazir Cards.
Whereas in the last 5 suits, 10 is the hightest and 1 the lowest numerical.

All cards in the suit have the oppurtunity of becoming the trump card, de- pending on the time of the day when they are being played.
In the dawn, the Jagannath/Padma Avatar card is played because the

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Words	293
Characters	1864
Sentences	13
Paragraphs	8
Read Time	2 minute(s)
Speak Time	2 minute(s)

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BUDDHA/JAGANNATHA (The Enlightened One/Lord of the Universe)

The ninth avatar is often identified as Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, who founded Buddhism. Born a prince, he renounced worldly life to seek enlightenment and alleviate suffering. His teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path offer a way to end the cycle of rebirth and attain Nirvana.

However, in some regional traditions, particularly in Odisha, Lord Jagannath is considered the ninth avatar. Jagannath, meaning "Lord of the Universe," is worshipped in the famous Puri temple along with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. The origins and identity of Jagannath are complex and debated, with connections to tribal deities, syncretic traditions, and Vaishnavism.

While seemingly distinct, both Buddha and Jagannath represent a divergence from traditional Vedic practices and an emphasis on compassion, wisdom, and a path to liberation or spiritual understanding. The inclusion of Buddha as an avatar can be seen as the assimilation of a major religious tradition into the Hindu pantheon, while Jagannath embodies a unique regional manifestation of the divine.

Since Bir Hambir had designed the cards based on the Ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu, his set of cards did not include Lord Buddha's figures. He rather stuck to using images of Lord Jagannath instead.

KALKI (The Future Warrior)

Kalki is the tenth and final avatar of Vishnu, who is yet to appear at the end of the current Kali Yuga (the age of darkness and degradation). According to prophecies, when dharma has completely declined, and evil reigns supreme, Kalki will descend on a white horse named Devadatta, wielding a blazing sword.

He will vanquish the wicked, destroy the (adharma - unrighteousness), and usher in a new Satya Yuga (the age of truth and purity), restoring cosmic balance and righteousness.

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Words	510
Characters	3008
Sentences	28
Paragraphs	11
Read Time	3 minute(s)
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Mughal Ganjifa Cards

Ganjifa became popular in India under the Mughal emperors in 16th century. Now it is also played in some places of Odisha with 96 cards in 8 suits of 12 cards each.

In 1952, Bir Hambir became the king of Bishnupur. He had a great friendship with emperor Akbar. During a visit to Akbar's court, kint Hambir came across the Ganjifa cards. In the Mughal darbar, king Hambir observed that the begams and their maids used to play this card game in their free time. Even the soldiers played these Ganjifa cards when they didn't have to go to war. Bir Hambir learnt from the Mughals how to play this game. Heavily inspired from these Ganjifa cards, he decided to create a new and unique set of cards for his kingdom featuring the ten avatars of lord Vishnu.

Although Ganjifa's gameplay and card structure appeared to be the same as Dasavatar cards but the suits themselves are entirely dissimilar.

In Ganjifa, each suit has two court cards, Shah (king) and Wazir (minister) with the numerical cards one to ten. The twelve suits of Akbar's Ganjifa in- clude Horses, Elephants, Infantry, Treasures, Warriors, Ships, Women, Gods, Demons, wild beasts and Serpants. The Ganjifa cards and their Characters bear resemblance and are based on the societal structure of the Mughals i.e the Muslim society where as the Dasavatar cards owe their existence to the Hindu societal structure.

chapter 2: origin & making process

The mystical story revolving around the Dasavatar is ancient, but the idea of portraying it in the form of playing cards of varied colours, shapes and forms is probably a concept which no historian can actually date. The birth of these cards and exact time when these cards came into popular culture is unknown and filled with mystery. Card playing has been a popular game among bengalis but it has always been the usual king-and-queen and spades-and-diamonds.

Probably this format was born during British rule, due to the colonial nature of the British. It is evident that the long history of our slavery towards the British during they ruled is interrelated and subtly hints at this king and queen and slave format.

But history states that the origin of court cards dates back to much earlier times. The only thing that changed during British rule is the symbols. The "Saheb-Bibi-Ghulam" format during the British rule was different from the format before the pre-British era. We are not familiar with these early formats and sadly that old format has been lost in the sands of time.

Born in Ayodhya as the eldest son of King Dasharatha and Queen Kaushalya, Rama is the epitome of dharma, righteousness, and ideal manhood. His life, chronicled in the epic Ramayana, is a tale of upholding moral values under the most challenging circumstances.

Due to a promise Dasharatha made to his stepmother Kaikeyi, Rama was exiled to the forest for fourteen years. He willingly accepted this fate to honor his father's word. His devoted wife Sita and loyal brother Lakshmana accompanied him.

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Words	714
Characters	4362
Sentences	50
Paragraphs	27
Read Time	4 minute(s)
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Throughout the ages, mankind has been constantly trying to search for methods of pastime. Human beings have primarily been farmers and hunters. As civilization developed over time, slowly human beings develop a system of money earning with the help of specializing in a certain kind of work which later developed into the term profession. With profession came constraints in time. And as human beings became busier, they developed the need for more and more hobbies during there free time. Such hobbies included the very important activity of playing cards. I have developed a keen interest in in this favourite hobby of mankind since time immemorial. What has fascinated me is

simple set of playing cards clearly depicting the entire societal structure of a certain dynasty or Kingdom or time period. Being a fine arts student, it has fascinated me that such playing cards have been made totally by hand, starting from the Mughal Era till modern Times.

chapter 1: cards around the globe

Playing cards has been a pastime for human beings for thousands of years. Their structures and designs vary greatly depending on their geography and time period. Hence, these cards also give us an insight into the entire glove's geographical evolution, culture, clothing, societal structures, etc.

Some popular playing cards over centuries can be roughly documented and categorised as follows:

1. The wine cards from the Tong dynasty dating back to the 6th century in China.
2. The Mughal Ganjifa cards, existing in India probably from as early as the 1500's.

3. The Dasavatar cards, featuring the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, existing roughly around the late 1500's.

4. French playing cards, brought to England by the English soldiers fighting wars in Normandy, France in the early 15th century. Soon after these cards would take on the form of the usual spades-and-clubs and hearts-and-diamonds as we know in the
5. Chinese Domino cards, appearing during the reign of the southern Song dynasty around 16th century.

6. The 20th century playing cards depicting Indian courts made in Paris.

7. The Raja Ravi Varma printed cards, depicting a separate historical set and a separate mythological set, all published between 1905 - 1910.
8. The Dilkhush playing cards, printed by Van Genechten, a popular Belgian cardmaker for the Calcutta based Kamala Soap factory in 1922.

9. The Alphabet cards by the Poona Chitrashala Press, printed both in Marathi and Urdu, around 1940.

3

10. The Air India playing cards, included as a part of their in-flight collectables, manufactured by Playwell Playing Cards Co. in 1980.

Card playing was popular throughout Mediaeval India. Visually, card playing was refer to Ganjifa, and each region of the country had its own set of cards, varying in forms, format of playing, shapes, characters and materials used.

A few popular Ganjifa cards include:

1. The Kasmir Ganjifa

2. The Nepal Ganjifa

3. The Rajasthan Ganjifa

The Sawantwadi Ganjifa from Maharashtra 5. The Navadurga Ganjifa from Odisha

6. The Mysooru Ganjifa

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Words	311
Characters	1883
Sentences	11
Paragraphs	10
Read Time	2 minute(s)
Speak Time	3 minute(s)

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chapter 3: evolution of the cards

During the times of Bir Hambir, when the Dasavatar Cards had been inspired from the Ganjifa cards, artists from his kingdom had created the Dasavatar cards with extreme detailing and skills par excellence.

As time passed by, in the later years gradually the artists lost their touch, and the Dasavatara Cards gradually declined in quality.

With time, the ornamentation and fine detailing of these avatars has dropped considerably. The extreme figurative details and the curves also have flattened out gradually with time. Also the colours used in borders of these cards have faded due to the drop in quality of the raw materials used for creating these cards.

For quite a few years now, to attract tourists and buyers, these avatars are being used not just in cards but also in different other products like souvenirs such as lamps, calendars, utensils made out of clay etc. Nowadays, Bishnupur artisans are also constantly creating paintings of these Dasavatars to create newer ideas and fresher concepts in the watercolour on canvas medium.

Lamps with the Avatar Motifs

Painting Inspired from Dasavatar

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With time, these cards are slowly and gradually getting lost in the sands of time. Only a few artisans from the entire country are dedicatedly still creating these Ganjifa Cards and Dasavatar Cards. Even though there is still a niche demand for these cards outside India as a rare collectors memorabilia, very few people in the world can actually still play this game, or are even interested to learn how to play it in this AI-Driven Digital Age.

Being associated with the making, creation and passing on the tradition of the Dasavatar Cards, the Fouzdar family is one of those rare families in the entire country who are still relentlessly and tirelessly creating these cards.

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Words	426
Characters	2434
Sentences	23
Paragraphs	15
Read Time	3 minute(s)
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At the begining of the game, a customary request is made by all the players to Lord Vishnu. This request is known as "Aarji" in the local language. This "Aarji" has been passed on in the format of a rhyming riddle. The "Aarji" goes as follows:

Na thakile bojh hoye jay pawa

Chobigulo chine niye, bhalo kore mishaye; Gonda gonda kore dao bilaye. Sath Vrigu, Aat Koli, Noy Dash Padma pheli Prabhur ashon khani dao sajaye.

Pratham avatar jaar du dastur hobe taar Aaro hobe jor bhenge, thek kheye saroa. Jor tip, tip soi, kimba sotip hole Du dastur hoye onner pawa.

Taaro hobe jor bhenge thek kheye saroa

Haath soi kore keu kichu pawar ashay Thik thik rekhe baki phele diye jay.

Ponero dostu hole saroa aat nahi chole Paona dostu niye bojh hoye jay, Haath soi korate bhul hoye jay. Sesh Panch dostu nahi taar odhikar.

Thik thik hath soi jodi khelo, khelo pore Onner sob kheloar poribe phapore Ek point jeet hoy Panch dostu hole Ei bhabe khela chole Prabhur pad-pronam janiye.

After the "Aarji", all the 120 cards are shuffled. Then they are distributed from both the sides. Every player shall get 24 cards each, in sets of 4.

During the churning of the cosmic ocean (Samudra Manthan) by the gods and demons to obtain the nectar of immortality (Amrita), Mount Mandara, used as a churning rod, began to sink. Lord Vishnu manifested himself as a colossal tortoise, Kurma, and supported the massive mountain on his back, providing the stable base needed for this pivotal event.

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VARAHA (The Boar)

The demon Hiranyaksha plunged the Earth (Bhudevi) into the cosmic ocean. To rescue her, Lord Vishnu assumed the powerful form of a boar, Varaha. After a fierce battle lasting a thousand years, Varaha

banished the demon and lifted the Earth out of the waters with his tusks, restoring it to its rightful place.

NARASIMHA (The Man-Lion)

The demon king Hiranyakashipu, the brother of Hiranyaksha, seeks to avenge his brother's death. After hard penance, he had gained a boon from Lord Brahma, which ensured that he can be killed by neither man nor animal, neither indoor nor outdoor, neither in the day nor at night, neither in the ground nor in the sky. He used this power to subjugate the Gods. Then Lord Vishnu descended as Narasimha: Half-Man, Half-Lion and killed him in twilight on the threshold of his house by laying him across his lap and using his claws to disembowel him.

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